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COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Eighteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 472nd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Wednesday, 3 June 1998 at 3.45 p.m.

Chairperson: Miss MASON

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The meeting was called to order at 3.45 p.m.

STATEMENTS BY CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN THE GLOBAL MARCH AGAINST CHILD LABOUR

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the children who were participating in the Global March against Child Labour took places at the Committee table, and the Committee members introduced themselves.

2. The CHAIRPERSON said that most meetings of the Committee were formal discussions at which it considered such issues as the insidious involvement of children in exploitative labour, which inhibited their full development. On behalf of the Committee, she warmly welcomed a number of children who were participating in the Global March against Child Labour, some of whom had been child workers. They were present in order to share with the Committee their experience of the Global March. She invited them to introduce themselves and talk to the Committee on any subject.

3. Kip OEBANDA (Philippines), a children's rights activist in his country, said that he worked for a radio programme designed to encourage children to express their opinions, a right to which they were entitled on equal terms with adults.

4. In defining the Global March, he must first describe the reality of child labour, rather than give mere statistics. The authorities held the lives of many children in their hands and, by juggling with those lives, had embarked upon a very dangerous path. A conservative estimate of children who toiled daily in countries around the world was 250 million, 3.7 million of whom lived in the Philippines, which had a population of 72 million.

5. The Committee members, all experts in the field, were certainly aware of a fact he had discovered on the March: that child labour drained away not only childhood, transforming the child into a robot, but also the soul, the heart, and the opportunity to find a religion and receive an education. Children did not deserve such treatment, because they were fundamentally innocent, defenceless and incapable of real evil.

6. Public awareness of the iniquities of child labour had increased in all the countries visited by the March, and would continue to do so, for although the March was technically at an end, the long crusade was only just beginning. Child labour was not only universal but universally evil, even in Iran which had the world's lowest child-labour rate of 4 per cent. When the public accepted child labour as part of tradition, it also accepted poverty and unemployment as part of that tradition, and that was what the struggle was about: to sensitize people to child labour and urge them to react against it. Politicians and influential people should spare no effort to ensure that child labour was eradicated. It had no place in today's world and demeaned the dignity of the human being.

7. Govind KHAVAL (Nepal), 15 years of age, said he currently lived at the Mukti Ashram Child Rehabilitation Centre in India and was involved in the South Asian Coalition on Child Support (SACCS).

8. In India, and at the Mukti Ashram, he met numerous children who had worked in factories and quarries, their bodies scarred from beatings and accidents, who were fearful of talking to ordinary people. That situation was repeated in many other countries in which he had marched. Their stories revealed the ease with which children were manipulated. Employers, realizing that children could become more productive with beatings, enjoyed a dual advantage: they employed children because children were unable to organize themselves in defence of their rights; the adults they employed were so grossly underpaid as to be unable to feed their families, and were therefore eager for their children to work. While laws against child servitude abounded, they were not properly implemented.

9. The March had been joined by former child workers who, sometimes exhausted and in pain after up to 12 miles of marching a day, would agree to put on cultural performances for their supporters in order to secure the latter's solidarity, in the firm conviction that no task was too demanding for protecting the rights of the child.

10. Another obstacle came, sadly and unexpectedly, from some child workers who - probably at the employers' instigation - propagated the idea of the right to work, claiming that, having to work as adults, they might as well start as children. He hoped that the idea would not win support, because the right of children was to receive an education.

11. The enormous public support attracted by the March convinced him that his dream of a day when all children attended school and were no longer subjected to child labour would come true.

12. Shaukat ALI (India), 12 years of age, said that he too lived at the Mukti Ashram Child Rehabilitation Centre. As a former child worker, he had been a chilli grinder and packer at a factory where he would be given small pieces of ice by senior labourers or masters to soothe his pains and obliged to resume work immediately. He had been required to work twice as hard as his adult colleagues but had been paid the equivalent of 50 cents a week, and that only occasionally. To any complaint or request for more of his wages, his employer would reply that the remainder had been sent to his home. After two years at the factory, he had one day joined a march he had seen and marched in Delhi, where he had first heard that children had the right to attend school and that child labour was illegal. He had never returned to work, but had gone to live at the Mukti Ashram.

13. With the Global March he had visited Italy, Iran, Pakistan and many European countries, ending in Geneva. The marchers had informed child workers in those countries of their rights and the need for their parents to obtain work so that children could exercise those rights.

14. In Pakistan he had seen many children working in hotels, where they were told by the employers that child labour was not illegal because if the children did not work, poor families would starve. The marchers had countered that argument by emphasizing the need for the Government to formulate policies that would ensure employment for the parents, enabling them to assume responsibility for their children and to send them to school.

15. By talking to new children arriving at the Mukti Ashram, he had discovered that they had sometimes been obliged to work up to 20 hours per day, receiving, in lieu of wages, a single chapatti and a little salt for their survival. Some children who were unable to continue working were even killed by their employers and their bodies dumped in a local pond.

16. Arnold ENGLE (Canada) said he lived in Montreal, where he worked for the organization "Free the Children", a youth group run entirely by children and devoted to the elimination of child labour. Its other principal concerns were youth empowerment and opportunities for children to become more vocal.

17. One aim of the Global March was to force Governments and politicians to pass new legislation or set up plans for feasible education and free compulsory primary education, which would be the cornerstone of the eradication of child labour and exploitation and give them the qualifications for adequately remunerated jobs as adults. A second aim was to educate the public, especially in Asia and the third-world countries - where the highest child-labour rates were to be found, about the child's rights to attend school and not to work. The third aim was to force Governments to provide education for children and implement projects for families so that children would not need to work.

18. The CHAIRPERSON invited members' comments on the experiences related by the children.

19. Mrs. KARP considered that the children were helping the Committee in its task by spreading the message that children deserved a better deal, not only on humanitarian grounds but because they possessed the right not to work and the right to receive an education, and by encouraging the general public to urge Governments to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child and eliminate child labour. She wished them success in that venture, which was, after all, one shared by the Committee.

20. Mrs. SARDENBERG, thanking the children for taking the time not only to address the Committee but to fulfil their part of the joint undertaking with the Committee through their worldwide activities, wondered why all the visitors were boys.

21. Kip OEBANDA (Philippines) explained that no discrimination had been intended. Since most of the marchers would be returning to their countries the following day, the girls had opted to enjoy time with their fellow-marchers while and he and his three colleagues had opted to enjoy time with the Committee.

22. Mrs. OUEDRAOGO congratulated the young people upon their important contribution to the campaign to end child labour. She asked what had been the response to the Global March in the countries it had passed through. Had the marchers had the opportunity to meet officials of those countries? She also wished to know what support they had received in their own countries. Finally, she urged them to pursue their campaign.

23. Shaukat ALI (India) said that the marchers had met, among others, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the German Minister of Labour Both had expressed strong support for the campaign and promised to bring pressure to bear on countries where child labour was still widespread.

24. Govind KHAVAL (Nepal) said that, paradoxically, the response had been weakest in those very countries. The issue did not seem to arouse strong feeling among the broad mass of people. In Viet Nam, the authorities had even prevented child labourers from participating in the March.

25. Mrs. PALME said that she herself had taken part in the March when it had passed through Stockholm, and she had been present when the marchers had met the Swedish Minister of Labour. Young Swedes had been very active in the campaign to end child labour, and she looked forward to their continued participation.

26. Mr. FULCI asked when the young people had first learned that there were international instruments to protect children's rights and that their countries, having ratified those instruments were obliged to implement their provisions.

27. Kip OEBANDA (Philippines) said that, in his experience, ratification was no guarantee of implementation. His country was a State party to the ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), yet child labour was still prevalent. It was up to ordinary citizens to put pressure on Governments to comply with the obligations they had undertaken.

28. Shaukat ALI (India) said that some Governments were all too ready to ratify international instruments in the hope of silencing public debate on difficult issues. They wished to be seen to be doing something, but that impression was belied by the presence of child labourers on almost every street in Asia, while the efforts of local campaigners were met with indifference. As a former child labourer he had not been aware of international instruments or children's rights, but he now visited schools to speak on the subject.

29. Mrs. MBOI asked when the young people had joined the March.

30. Shauket ALI (India) replied that they had done so on 17 January 1998, when the marchers had set out from Manila.

31. Mrs. MBOI said that they had no doubt been tired, wet and cold, but they should be immensely proud of their efforts, and she urged them to continue their campaign.

32. Mrs. KARP pointed out that one aspect of the Committee's work was to put pressure on Governments to comply with their international obligations as the young people had urged. They must not feel frustrated for, while the process of eliminating child labour would take many years, they were playing a vital part in it. She was firmly convinced that the empowerment of children, particularly those who had personal experience of child labour and could give eloquent testimony as to its impact, was the most effective means of ending that scourge.

33. Shaukat ALI (India) said he understood that the process took time, but childhood passed quickly. Thus, it was vital that more should be done now.

34. The CHAIRPERSON thanked the young people, who were passionate, articulate and realistic advocates for their cause. She agreed that childhood was a precious time which could not be replaced, and she therefore looked forward like them to the day when child labour was eliminated. She invited the adults who had accompanied the young people to introduce themselves to the Committee.

35. Mr. DOTTRIDGE (Anti-Slavery International), speaking on behalf of the Steering Committee of the Global March against Child Labour, said that the marchers had aimed to focus public attention on the debate at the International Labour Conference concerning the adoption of a new convention on extreme forms of child labour. He urged the members of the Committee to follow that process closely and thanked them for their interest and support.

36. He had been accompanied by Ms. Christine Compaoré, chairperson and founder of the Association de Protection et de Sauvegarde de l'Enfance en Danger and chairperson of the Organizing Committee for the Global March in Burkina Faso; Mr. Peter Munene from Kenya, representing the African Network for the Prevention of and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect, a non-governmental organization active throughout Africa; Mr. Reggie Norton, the chairman of Anti-Slavery International and Suman, a founding member of SACCS and director of the Mukti Ashram Child Rehabilitation Centre.

37. Kip QEBANDA (Philippines) said that while he doubted he would see the complete eradication of child labour in his lifetime, he was proud to have contributed to the process, since the situation of children tomorrow could depend on the actions of their peers today.

38. Arnold ENGLE (Canada) said that those involved in that process must now build on the momentum created by the March and the debate at the International Labour Conference.

39. Shaukat ALI (India) said that the support of the Committee and the public had been a great source of strength. Upon his return to India, he would continue to go to the villages with the message that every child had the right to education, play and, above all, love.

The meeting rose at 4.50 p.m.